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ABSTRACT

Although grammar has its place in secondary education, teachers have been consistently premature in their zeal to impose order and precision on students' understanding of language through grammar. This paper argues that romance demands and deserves a special place in the language curriculum. Romance encompasses the humanistic aspects of language which lie beyond the bounds of linguistics and includes semiotics and man's symbol-making capacity. A course in semiotics is outlined through a discussion of four prerequisites: a semiotics course must have explicit student input; a new set of questions which support and extend student input must be formulated; a new system of symbols and signs must be explored as an instrument broad enough in scope of application and narrow enough to penetrate material to a sufficient depth; and a scale must be constructed which will chart student progress from one level of understanding to another. (TS)

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SEMIOTICS: Towards Romance and Precision in Language

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> Language is full of lessons for those who know how to question it. Through all the centuries humanity has deposited in Language the acquisitions of material and moral life. But it must be approached from the side on which it appeals to the mind.
>
> Semantics
> Michel Breal

In schools it has long been safe to assume that the lessons of language are best taught and learned through the study of grammar, that however construed grammar constitutes the essence of what we know about our ability to speak, to write, and even to think. Short of contesting all the familiar arguments supporting this assumption, one conclusion strikes me as unavoidable in light of Breal's cogent warning about language being approached from the side on which it appeals to the mind. Despite its recent and celebrated renovations, grammar does not appeal to the minds nor has it ever captured the hearts of youth.

Now while I do not believe this conclusion requires elaborate documentation, I am prepared to admit that noteworthy exceptions quite possibly abound. My point is that such exceptions scarcely justify the lingering presumption that grammar deserves to be the only language lesson we deem worth teaching. To the

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contrary, before we are engulfed in yet another linguistic revolution, I think we are obligated to promote our own search for alternative lessons in language. Accordingly, after briefly addressing a few matters crucial to instruction, I want to sketch out the framework of a course called "semiotics." With the help of three colleagues over the past five years semiotics has been taught both as a half and full-year elective to some 500 students, ranging from sophomores to seniors of below average to advanced placement achievement. I have called this course semiotics both in deference to the Greeks, who originally intended it to mean "observant of signs," and to the distinguished array of investigators whose professed lines of inquiry not only fall within the general scope of semiotics, but also appear to merge in part with the concerns I shall here attempt to describe.

If grammar has largely failed to foster and sustain interest in language among students, it seems to me that the fault stems not from the kind of grammar taught but from prolonged neglect of a fundamental principle of instruction. This principle inheres in Alfred North Whitehead's still timely reminder that "Education must essentially be a setting in order of a ferment already stirring in the mind."(The Aims of Education 1929, p.29) By its very nature grammar imposes upon language an orderliness that leaves little room for any ferment that could conceivably be shared by an adolescent, thus breaking what Whitehead fondly termed "the rhythm of education;" i.e., the natural sequence of inquiry that progresses from the stage

of "romance" to that of precision and generalization. "In no part of education can you do without discipline or can you do without freedom," he says, "but in the stage of romance the emphasis must always be on freedom, to allow the child to see for itself and to act for itself." Subsequently, when the stage of romance has run its course, and the student seeks guidance from another quarter - be it merely terminology, the simplification of ideas, or the acquisition of appropriate facts - then the emphasis must shift towards precision, lest he drift aimlessly amid the welter of his own musings and never witness the real thrust of ideas to which he is rightful heir. The crux of the matter, then, falls to striking a proper balance in education between romance and precision.

Now significantly, it was Whitehead's contention that this critical balance in education was forever being tipped in favor of the second stage of inquiry, unduly confining instruction to the stage of precision:

> My point is that a block of assimilation of ideas inevitably arises when a discipline of precision is imposed before a stage of romance has run its course in the growing mind. There is no comprehension apart from romance. It is my strong belief that the cause of so much failure in the past has been due to the lack of careful study of the due place of romance. Without the adventure of romance, at best you get inert knowledge without initiative, and at worst you get contempt of ideas without knowledge.

Bereft of romance, precision is a barren pursuit. Similarly, unless we subsequently attempt to apprehend the facts acquired through precision in their broad generality, the stage of precision languishes for want of application. Hence, education

must ideally be concerned alike with ferment, with the fostering of precision, and with the generality that such precision then makes possible. Viewed in this context, I submit that although grammar may have its rightful place in secondary education, we have been consistently premature in our zeal to impose order and precision on the students' understanding of language through grammar. We have not, in other words, given sufficient consideration to the due place of romance in the study of language.

Of late, to be sure, there have been notable attempts to broaden the base of linguistic inquiry by incorporating more-"relevant" and compelling areas of concern. In three successive articles appearing in the English Journal(November, 1969), for instance, three different strategies are aired for expanding language instruction. Carlton Laird, for one, judges that "we have only begun to realize the potentialities of language as an excitant." Besides grammar, he suggests that etymology, psycholinguistics, and dialects offer promising potential. Donald Sanborn submits that "the pluralistic nature of the linguistic discipline" may best be approached through six related "perspectives": the psycholinguistic, the synchronic-diachronic, the external and internal perspective, the inter-relational(interdisciplinary) and rhetorical perspectives. Interestingly enough, Sanborn recommends a quite different application of Whitehead's stages of education than set forth here by assigning each stage to traditionally grouped grade

levels: romance for elementary, precision for junior high, and generalization for high school. In contrast, Charles Weingartner suggests that "the study of semantics can do more to help students become more perceptive and sophisticated users of language than any other form of language study." Perhaps more in keeping with the notion of romance, James Moffett has said that "a severe limitation of both older and new linguistics is that they deal with no structure larger than the sentence...What is humanistic is precisely what lies beyond the bounds of linguistics, which is a drastically small content for studying man's symbol-making capacity. More appropriate are those individual and group arenas that psychology and sociology have staked out."(Teaching the Universe of Discourse 1968, pp182-183)

While such proposals indicate an encouraging trend away from unmitigated grammar, they nevertheless appear to fall short of the subject-matter which Whitehead viewed as "a somewhat discursive activity amid a welter of ideas and experiences... a process of discovery, a process of becoming used to curious thoughts, of shaping questions, of seeking for answers, of devising new experiences, of noticing what happens as a result of new adventures." If these are the criteria for romance, then I would argue that neither grammar nor the skillful compilation of its derivatives can provide a sufficiently rich environment to support the diverse activities, the new ideas, or the kind of experiences called for here. More than fleeting diversion or mere gestures towards modernity, romance both demands and deserves

a special place in our language curriculum, a separate site that offers us real promise of renewed perspective. Specifically, I see the establishment of this new site as having four prerequisites. To begin with, it requires much more explicit student input than specialized inquiries such as grammar evidently permit. Secondly, we need to generate a new set of questions that will both support and extend student input. Thirdly, we must shape an alternative instrument to direct our inquiry, an instrument which though broad in scope of application will at the same time enable us to penetrate our material in sufficient depth. And finally we need to construct a scale that will chart our progress from one level of understanding to another. Let us now consider the implications of each requirement in terms of our course in semiotics.

Although every treatment of language purports to address some aspect of the student's understanding, surprisingly little credence is given to what students may actually have to <u>say</u> about this understanding, either at the beginning or end of instruction. Conversely, the very nature of romance requires us at the outset to elicit the ferment that stirs in our students, however primitive or amorphous it may be. Otherwise, any ideas we introduce or precision we eventually try to encourage risk becoming "inert knowledge." So charged, I know of no more effective way to fulfill our first requirement than simply <u>asking</u> students to describe their conceptions of language outright; e.g., what language is, what it does, how and what it means, and generally what one may either say or ask about it. This is precisely what we do on the very first day of class, giving our

students a couple of days to complete the assignment in writing. Never having been asked this kind of question before, students naturally haven't a clue about what a conception might be or what kinds of information it should include. Other than clarifying the meaning of "conception," however, we give them no other information, despite their desperate efforts to determine what "the answer" is.

What do students say about language in these initial conceptions? In general every student says something about the relation between language and communication. In some cases they make this relation functional by saying that the purpose of language is to communicate. Lacking this, they will take a more formal tack by saying something to the effect that "language is a form of communication." Variations upon this theme in a typical heterogeneous class of sophomores and juniors run as follows:

"Language is one of man's main tools."
"Language is a way of communicating."
"Language is a way in which people and animals express themselves."
"Language is communication in many forms."
"Language was created for the sole purpose of communication."
"Language is an expression of self."
"Language is a means of communication."
"Language is one common thing among a number of citizens of one place"
"Language is a very important process of communication."
"Writing and talking are not the only means of language, but almost every little thing someone does is a part of communication.
"Basically, language is an elaboration on communication. Man can communicate without language, but he cannot have language without communication."

When they see language as "a form of communication," then in their discussion they will enumerate other forms; e.g., animal cries, art, music, gestures, sign language, etc., all of which are considered as simply mutations of spoken language. From here they

will proceed to explore the variety of forms implied, whether written or spoken, verbal or non-verbal, foreign or domestic. This line of inquiry frequently terminates by broaching the topic of universal language, which without exception finds strong support. Where function becomes the dominant concern, the importance of "getting one's point across" and "the ability to express oneself" is stressed. This generally leads to consideration of the crucial role played by language; i.e., what the world without language would be like. In this context, too, the issue of how language originated frequently arises, replete with cavemen emitting "grunts and groans," their subsequent invention of language to meet their "needs," and thence to the swift emergence of language as a "tool." Occasionally, students will go on to consider the diversity of languages and why some are more "advanced" than others. Whether viewed from the vantage point of function or of form, then, students see the relationship between language and communication as perfectly symmetrical; i.e., language is any form of communication and every form that communicates is language.

Predictably, the questions that students are asked to formulate as part of their conceptions tend to reflect the subject-matter already touched upon. In the same heterogeneous class of sophomores and juniors, for example, we get a list of questions (omitting duplications) like this:

"Why isn't there just one universal language?"
"If man started communication just like animals, with motions, etc., why did man go farther and not animals?"
"Why do people in different countries have different languages?"

"How do babies learn what verbs mean, and the meaning of strange word
"Would man really be able to live without any language?"
"Where did language come from?"
"What happened before language?"
"How do people invent words?"
"Did animals speak before us?"
"Does language have to have thought to it?'
"How much of what we say to animals do they really understand?"
"Would it be possible to teach a high primate(other then man) to writ
"How well do animals communicate with each other?"
"What animals don't have a language of some sort?"
"Could there be a higher form of language, telepathy for example?"
"If Adam and Eve were the first to be created, how were all these other forms of language derived, if they spoke only one language?"
"What trend is language taking and what will it be in 100 years?"
"Does the word language confine itself to words?"
"Why do people think?"
"When thoughts are converted into words, something is lost; what is i

Surely there is more ready-made romance here than we can conveniently ignore. While grammar is evidently not included within the ranks of this romance, we can characterize the existing ferment as centering upon the origin of language, animal communication, and the diversity of language forms, whereas the acquisition of language and the relation of language to thought appear as minor provisional concerns.

Recall that although Breal affirms language to be full of lessons, he also stipulates that such lessons belong to "those who know how to question it." Similarly, if we are to fulfill our second requirement for romance, we need first to recognize the crucial role that questions must play in our lessons, much as they do in all true inquiries. More important, we must try to tailor our questions to the kind of ferment we have found stirring in our students. Besides a pivotal concern for the relation between language and communication, the assertions as well as the questions of our students evince a breadth of concern that far exceeds the exactness of formulation. In

recognizing many different forms of communication, for instance, they do not appear to appreciate the very real differences that obtain among these widely varying forms; e.g., between a gesture and a word, a word and a picture, an animal cry and a human oath. This oversight contributes to their essentially tautologous view of language and communication. For them both the ends and the means of communication are ostensibly determined by the "needs" of the organism in question, so that were animals' needs sufficiently like mankind's it is perfectly conceivable that animals could somehow evolve suitable forms to match such needs, regardless of the logical and physiological limitations involved. Like the emperor's new clothes, language is thus viewed as a direct extension of the thoughts, the feelings, or the instincts that stem from "needs"; it is an invisible cloak with the mystical power to evoke whatever comes to mind and fix it with an appropriate form.

In tacitly assuming one kind of magic, however, our students overlook another which constitutes perhaps the most startling yet least heralded fact of language. Susanne Langer expresses it this way: "Language is, without doubt, the most momentous and at the same time the most mysterious product of the human mind. Between the clearest animal call of love or warning or anger, and man's least trivial word, there lies a whole day of creation - or in modern phrase a whole chapter of evolution." (Philosophy in a New Key, 1942, p.103) It seems to me that though students may privately muse about the origins of language and its

importance for comprehending the world, they scarcely suspect the real momentousness and mystery harbored in a single, trivial word. If language is momentous, it is because it represents a flawless system whose potential mastery holds out to them all the promise of power inherent in the Word. So conceived, the only mystery involved lies in finding the precise means of acquiring this power. Unfortunately, such optimism is indirectly supported by our perennial insistence that students do in fact "master" their language, as if once mastered - whatever this means - they should be free to pursue the real business of English, unencumbered by doubts or wonder. The Greeks used to say that to marvel is the beginning of knowledge and where we cease to marvel we are in danger of ceasing to know. Accordingly, I think the thrust of our inquiry should seek to replace the notion of mastery with the true mystery intrinsic to language, thus confronting that chapter of evolution embedded in every word.

"There is in principle no separating language from the rest of the world," says Quine, "at least as conceived by the speaker."(From a Logical Point of View 1953, p.61) In pursuit of this principle we first endeavor to confront our students with the world of which language speaks and to challenge their assumptions about the way this world operates, thus broaching the mystery of how language enables the speaker to cope symbolically with the demands and complexities of his everyday environment. Rather than questioning them outright, however, we provide them with a series of experiments designed to address various

aspects of the problems which they themselves have raised. Take the first experiment for example: two students sit at opposite ends of a small table, their view of each other obstructed by a screen interposed between them. To one of these students, whom we call the "sender," we give a set of flat plastic shapes, each differing in color and all of which fit together into a conventional shape, such as a capital letter or geometric figure. To the other student, whom we call the "receiver", we give a similar set of pieces but differing in colors. Our instructions are that the sender must tell the receiver how to assemble his pieces into the proper configuration. For the time being only the sender is permitted to talk, and though he may say anything he likes, he cannot use gestures or pictures. The rest of the class observes and takes notes on what occurs. If the first sender fails, then we call upon other students to participate and in due course allow two-way communication between sender and receiver to facilitate the task.

The results? Without exception in twenty different classes the instructions of the initial sender prove woefully inadequate. Also without exception, however, the class as a whole ultimately completes the task, usually within the space of two full periods. Now our question is this: why at first do they fail and what ultimately enables them to succeed? Predictably, they attribute failure to the fact that they "are not good at English," that they "can't communicate," that the subjects either failed to be "clear" or to "follow directions," that the task was "too hard," the subjects "too dumb," and so forth. But if this is

true, we ask, then how do they account for the final completion of the task? Surely the subjects did not improve their English significantly in two short periods, nor did they increase their vocabulary, master their grammar, or generally acquire sufficient communicative "skills" to explain their success. Did the task get easier, the subjects smarter? In short, what specific elements in the process of communication just observed appeared to influence the outcome?

Of course such experiments are not exactly new to English teachers who are accustomed to having students describe how to sharpen a pencil or make a peanut butter sandwich. For that matter, precisely the same experiment is performed every time the teacher asks a student to put pen to paper, for we can think of the sender as virtually the same as a writer, just as the receiver is tantamount to a reader. But this still does not explain why senders as well as writers so often fail to complete their assigned tasks. Witness what perfect communicators all our students would be if they actually understood our persistent advice about "being more specific," "show, don't tell," "keep the reader in mind," "think before you write," "use examples," etc. I think their failure to understand what both we and they are talking about indicates not only the seriousness of the problem we have addressed but also something about the nature of that problem.

Supposing, for example, that instead of asking students to speak or write their instructions we decided they should <u>draw</u> them. Obviously, the task would be completed with such dispatch that we could no langer truly say a problem of communication existed.

Yet given the fact that whether drawn or spoken the relationships among the puzzle pieces remain the same, why should one mode of communication be so much more effective than another? Just why is this picture "worth" so many words? In part it is because our perceptual acumen obviously exceeds our verbal facility, for even animals are capable of making very sophisticated visual distinctions. Language, on the other hand, forces us to transform reality from simultaneous apprehension into linear sequences that have no counterparts in nature. Speakers are thus divorced from the world of immediate experience and must operate under the peculiar demands of a system whose relation to time and space is essentially arbitrary. Consequently, many of the difficulties encountered in verbal expression pertain to our special symbolic relationship with the environment, the relationship whose real complexity our students vastly underrate whenever they try to bridge it. After Flavell, we call this "the problem of existence"; i.e., "that what you perceive, think, or feel in any given situation need not coincide with what I perceive, think, or feel." There is, in other words, a whole chapter of evolution that divides every sender from his receiver, a chapter that opens up the true mystery and momentousness of language.

Turning now to our third requirement for romance, let us consider what instrument best serves both the issues raised by students and our underlying thrust of inquiry - the problem of existence. According to Jakobson, the celebrated international linguist, "It must be remembered that whatever level of communicatio

we are treating, each of them implies some exchange of messages and thus cannot be isolated from the semiotic level, which in its turn assigns the prime role to language."(Selected Writings 1971, p.699) As the "science of signs" semiotics links the study of verbal messages in linguistics with the wider science of communication which includes aspects of anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Founded on the interest in signs first expressed by the Stoics and Epicureans, semiotics was first proposed as a major division of science by John Locke whose "Semeiotica" became known as "the doctrine of signs." Convinced that Locke's treatment of signs paved the way for a whole new inquiry, Charles Sander Pierce called it "semiotic" and proceeded to pioneer many of it most salient distinctions. Somewhat later, yet independently, Ferdinand de Saussure(the "father" of structural linguistics) proposed the development of a new science to study "the life of signs," a science called "semiology" which included linguistics as a part. Subsequently, in pursuit of the symbolic nature of language, an increasingly important role was attributed to signs in the work of Ogden and Richards, Charles Morris, Susanne Langer, and Jean Piaget.

A "sign" may be initially defined much as it is in the dictionary; i.e., "Something that suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition, or quality not immediately evident." Visual perception, for instance, exemplifies a system of signs inasmuch as it conveys through one medium something that is not evident in another; e.g., a distant object. Depth, in other words, is not something we actually see but a relation

among objects that we infer from such visual signs as size, shape, brightness, and clarity. Similarly, a word constitutes a different kind of sign, sound another, and sensation from touch yet another. By systematically manipulating these various systems of signs that are so much a part of our environment we can learn something about our relation to this environment. Optical "illusions", for instance, work their magic upon us because they deliberately distort the system of visual signs that under normal conditions permit us to make correct inferences about the nature of what we "see."

"Every message is made of signs," says Jakobson; "correspondingly, the science of signs termed semiotic[s] deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs."(1971, p.698) The principle underlying the structure of signs refers to the special relationship between every signifier and what it signifies. Theorists generally recognize five different kinds of signs: the signal, index, icon, symbol, and sign proper. With signals the signifier is always accompanied by what it signifies, as perhaps best exemplified by Pavlov's classic experiments in stimulus and response where the bell signals the food it accompanies. When this accompaniment is broken, the signal is rapidly extinguished. In an index the signifier is always a physical part of the signified, much as an indexed dictionary shows parts of the pages to which it refers. In contrast, icons are images

which while not part of what they represent nevertheless bear a physical resemblance between signifier and signified as in ordinary pictures. Such is not the case, however, with either symbols or signs, both of which are arbitrary in their relationship between signifier and signified, and must therefore be learned rather than simply perceived. The difference between a symbol and sign proper depends on whether the learned relationship is personal or conventional. Thus, a rose may personally symbolize a myriad of possible meanings, whereas the sign "rose" reflects certain meanings reached by prior agreement.

The importance of these distinctions, many of which were first advanced by Pierce, "opens new, urgent tasks and far-reaching vistas to the science of language," according to Jakobson. (1971, p.357) We find, for example, that the cardinal difference between human language and animal communication is that while the former is primarily symbolic in nature, the latter chiefly employs signals, indexes, and icons. Moreover, thanks to Piaget, we also discover that human cognitive development pivots on what he calls "the semiotic function"; i.e., "the ability to differentiate a signifier from what it signifies." In the process of acquiring language, for instance, a child recapitulates the whole spectrum of signs just described. Starting with signals and indexes, he must learn to extricate himself from the "here and now" of action and perception before he is able to engage in symbolic play and language per se. Piaget in fact defines intelligence as the "degree of complexity of distant interaction" and measures it according to the type of signs children are able to use.

Now given the relationship between language and communication as the focus of student input, the problem of existence as the main trust of inquiry, and signs as our investigative instrument, what lessons in language do we aim to teach and how to we propose to assess the results of our instruction? Not unlike instruction in grammar, semiotics aims to increase the student's understanding of language. Recognizing the due place of romance in language, however, the criterion for this understanding begins and ends with the student's own conception of language rather than with the specifics of a particular theoretical concept imposed from without. In other words, instead of insisting that our students assimilate facts derived from some favored concept of language, our aim in semiotics is to develop the embryonic concept already embodied in their initial conceptions of language. Assuming that this concept hinges on the relationship between language and communication, our primary goal is to broaden, objectify, and integrate the student's conception of this relationship.

Our curriculum in semiotics is therefore structured so as to parallel Whitehead's stages of romance, precision, and generalization. First semester instruction aims to increase the student's awareness of the problem of existence and thus initially convince him of the need for precision by considering this problem within a broad range of contexts and points of view. Inasmuch as exactness of formulation is subordinated to the width of relationship, we interpret this instruction as romance. Such romance includes an initial exposure to the role of signs in conveying one's sense of reality, which is examined through a series of

experiments, readings, "language games," and discussions relating to "existence." In the second semester the focus of instruction shifts towards precision and generalization as manifested in certain systems of communication; e.g., animals, social rituals, kinship, artificial and natural languages. Before creating a language of their own as a final assignment, complete with supporting culture, vocabulary, grammatical structure, phonology, and a writing system, students study a radically pared version of English which serves as a kind of laboratory language. After initially confronting the general problems of communication exhibited in the word as sign, then, we study the degrees of precision manifested in selected systems of communication, thence returning to many of the problems initially examined in our attempts to recreate language.

The course ends as it begins with the student's conception of language. In five years of reading initial and final conceptions we have managed to isolate five levels of understanding which we use to assess the student's progress in broadening, objectifying, and integrating his conception of language. We have already analyzed initial conceptions, most of which fall at level #1; e.g., language is broadly yet vaguely conceived as a conglomeration of disparate attributes that exhibit no special priorities. Although a student at level #2 recognizes the diversity of subject matter subsumed by language, he perceives his task as primarily one of mastering an accretion of facts, each of which he suspects is "taken for granted." Proof of his understanding, as well as his ability to communicate, thus depends on the number of facts he can retain.

Beyond the pure bulk of knowledge involved in language, students at level #3 perceive certain contradictions which though difficult to explain may be skirted by sufficient exercise of caution and deliberate assumption of an "open mind." While he perceives the dawning of "existence" and the consequent need for precision, he thus feels no obligation to resolve or penetrate the contradictions confronting him. Level #4 witnesses the blossoming of "existence". as real but still relativistic and restricted to certain areas, some of which are considered in depth. Language and communication are thus seen as distinctive and an effort is made to grasp the systematic nature of both. Finally, at level #5, the student recognizes that although no two people see anything just alike, the systematic application of form to all versions of thought and activity unites differing conceptions into common concepts. It is at this level that students manage to construct an integrated view of language, touching on all areas of inquiry in detail and evincing personal commitment to furthering this inquiry in chosen domains.

Although we in no way attempt to"teach" this scale of understanding directly, we use it to help us determine our students' relative progress. In a recent sample of 53 sophomores, juniors, and seniors we found that initial conceptions averaged 1.43 on the evaluative scale, whereas final conceptions reached an average of 2.83. 31% of these students moved up one level on the scale, 45% moved up two levels of understanding, 6% moved up three levels, and 18% remained virtually unchanged in their initial and final conceptions. The final levels of all students in the sample

approximated a normal curve with 13% at level #1, 25% at level #2, 30% at level #3, 25% at level #4, and 7% at level #5.

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